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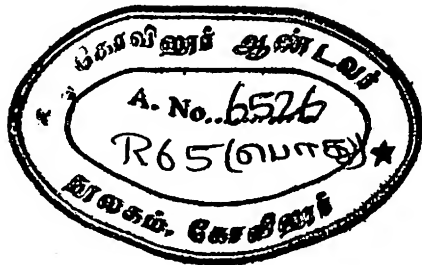
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**AVASTHATRAYA
OR
THE UNIQUE METHOD OF VEDANTA**

BY
Y. SUBRAHMANYA SARMA



THE ADHYATMA PRAKASHA KARYALAYA
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PREFATORY NOTE

The following is a reprint, with slight alterations, of an article contributed to the Vedanta Number of the *Kalyana Kalpataru*, Gorakhpur, in 1936.

Readers interested in the subject are recommended to study Sankara's Bhashyas on the Upanishads, especially the *Mandukya*, *Prasna*, and portions of *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chandogya* relating to the three Avasthas. The present writer's *Sankara Hridaya* or *Mulavidya-Nirasa* in Sanscrit will also be found helpful. For the English-knowing readers, however, there is one and only one excellent book, "*Vedanta or the Science of Reality*" by Mr. K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer B.A., of Bangalore City. This book almost exhausts the merits of the Avasthaic Method and should be in the hands of every earnest student of Vedanta.

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OR

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All the Vedantic schools are agreed that the System of Vedanta as found in the principal Upanishads and elaborated by Badarayana in his famous Sutras, attaches very great importance to the examination of the three Avasthas, or conditions of life, called Waking, Dream, and Dreamless Sleep. There is divergence of opinion, however, regarding the purpose which this examination is intended to serve in the system. With profound respect to all Acharyas, who no doubt have equal claim on us as having ministered to the needs of countless souls, I propose to show in these pages what a

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veritable magician's wand this method of enquiry has proved in the hands of that matchless thinker, Sri Sankaracharya; for where all the other commentators saw no more than a confirmation of man's inherent weakness and helplessness as justifying his eternal dependence on a scripture-revealed God by whose grace alone he could hope to attain a Post-mortem salvation, this great apostle of Vedic Monism alone visioned the most comprehensive method devisable to demonstrate scientifically the essential identity of the human soul with Brahman or Absolute Existence, Consciousness and Bliss.

It is neither possible nor desirable that chapter and verse should be quoted for each and every one of the statements made here in order to convince the reader that Sankara actually regarded the Avasthaic Method as possessing such paramount importance for Vedanta as has been indicated above. It will be enough to adduce two

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typical passages extracted from his *Bhashya* on the *Mandukya Upanishad* with *Gaudapada-karika*—the smallest of the ten principal Upanishads, which exclusively treats of the Avasthas. A careful reader will not miss the significant remark with which Sankara introduces the work:—

‘ वेदान्तार्थसारसंग्रहभूतमिदं प्रकरणचतुष्टयम् । ’

“This is a summary of the essence of all Vedantic teaching.” Again, in introducing the Avasthaic method as set forth by Gaudapada in his explanatory Karikas on Mandukya, the Acharya observes:—

“एवमन्योन्यविरुद्धत्वात्संसारकारणानि रागद्वेषदोषास्पदानि प्रावादुकानां दर्शनानि । अतो मिथ्यादर्शनानि तानीति तद्युक्तिमिरेव दर्शयित्वा चतुष्कोटिवर्जितत्वाद्वागादिदोषानास्पदं स्वभावशान्तमद्वैतदर्शनमेव सम्यग्दर्शनमित्युपसंहृतम् । अथेदानीं स्वप्रक्रियादर्शनार्थं आरम्भः ।”

“The views of different schools contradict one another and lead to *Samsara* (transmigration) as engendering the evils

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of love and hate; hence they are all misconceived. Having shown this through their own arguments, it has been concluded that the Adwaita, free from the fourfold defects already mentioned as well as from the evils of love and hate, naturally conduces to peace and is, therefore, the only right view. *And now this section is begun in order to set forth the peculiar method of this philosophy.*" (IV- 87 to 90.)

It is of more practical interest to enquire about the special features of the method which render it impossible to be superseded or stultified by any other. In the first place, it is the only method which considers life in all its aspects. Waking, Dream and Sleep exhaust all independent manifestations of Reality and, as Sankara observes, "there is nothing beyond these three to be known, for all the postulates of different schools are comprehended in these." 'एतच्चित्तिरेकेण ज्ञेयानुपपत्तेः, सर्वप्रावादुककल्पितवस्तुनोऽत्रैवान्तर्भावात्'

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And, in the second place, any metaphysical conclusion based on the co-ordination of experiences of the three Avasthas, cannot possibly be stultified for the simple reason that, while stultification can happen only in time, such a conclusion will have taken us to heights where time is conspicuous by its absence.

In explanation of the second statement made above, it will be useful to observe that sitting in judgment over the Avasthas really means taking an attitude of self-dissociation from and objectification of all phenomena whatsoever. My waking condition, for instance, includes, on this view, the whole universe of my percepts and concepts, the entire universe containing all that I perceive, all that I can infer or imagine or conceive in that state; not merely men, animals and things, suns, moons and stars, angels, devils, and other spirits, or even imaginary persons, creatures and

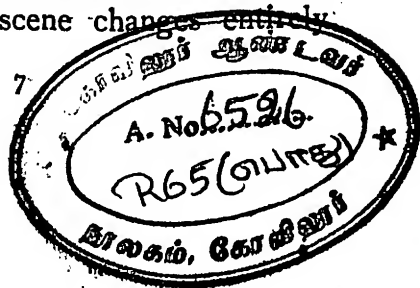
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things inhabiting worlds ever conceived in poetry or fiction, or creations of frenzied brains, but also my own body, mind, intellect and ego as well. In one sweep, I include all the subjective and the objective elements of my waking and stand, as it were, an unaffected witness of this vast panorama. It must not be forgotten that waking time, past, present and future, is wholly within this broad embrace of Waking ; so is space with its distinctions of here and there, up and down. The disposition of the mind herein depicted may be very difficult for one to adopt ; but granted the willingness to take a detached view of things and the capacity to reflect, one cannot escape the conclusion that the witness of the waking condition is, in fact, the witness of all that is perceivable or conceivable there, of all the worlds with which one commences in actual experience or imagination there. I may refer the reader interested in this study

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to Sankara's commentary on Mandukya where Atman in the Waking State is described as 'सप्ताङ्गः' (consisting of seven organs). Sankara shows there how the Atman in Waking is, as the witnessing Consciousness, identical with all the embodied selves (सर्वपिण्डात्मानन्यत्वात्).

If we now turn to a consideration of the Dream State, and assume the same attitude of dissociation, we are struck with the marvellously identical nature of the two conditions. No doubt, from the monobasic view which induces us to identify ourselves with the little ego of Waking alone, we are persuaded that the waking world is common to a number of souls in contrast with dreams which are exclusively our own. But the moment we incline to the tribasic view of Vedanta, the moment we wish to occupy a position from where we can examine all the three states without any partiality for either the waking ego or the dreaming ego, the scene changes entirely.



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The Dream condition now presents an exact replica of Waking, so much so that we are at a loss to fix up any marks of identity by which to recognize Waking as such. For in Dream we are confronted with all the contexts both subjective and objective, set in an exactly similar framework of time, space and causation. (Compare the *Mandukya* Mantras which apply the same epithets 'सप्ताङ्गः' and 'एकोनविंशतिमुखः' to both the states). On waking, of course, we do detect that dreams are only subjective and temporary, and that the phenomena there are neither coherent nor governed by irreversible laws of time or causation; but as this is only from a different thought-position where we identify ourselves with the waking ego, the conclusion drawn from the impartial view described above remains unaffected.

An important corollary from the identical nature of Dream and Waking thus established,

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is that the witnessing Atman, who is the sole warranty for this identification, has to be necessarily regarded as transcending the limitations of both the subjective and the objective aspects of either state. A verse in the *Kathopanishad* declares this profound truth thus :—

“ स्वप्नान्तं जागरितान्तं चोभौ येनानुपश्यति ।

महान्तं विभुमात्मानं मत्वा धीरो न शोचति ॥

(११-१-४)

“ That great all-pervading One through whom one is enabled to see both dream and waking, realizing Him as the Atman the wise man grieves no more.” Time, space and causality appropriate to each state are found in either ; and so are the subjective and the objective parts of the world peculiar to each state. Now while, as the ego in each state, we are undoubtedly subject to the joys and sorrows of the particular world, it is not difficult to see

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that as the witnessing Atman who spans both the states, we transcend both, and are above all the petty joys and cares of the passing moods. The *Brihadaranyaka* gives a striking illustration of this when it compares Atman to a mighty fish which swims from bank to bank of a river unaffected by the gushing stream which it cuts across.

We are now in a position to assert that our real Self or Atman, witness of Dream and Waking, knows no limitation of time, space or causation. It is not delimited by a second which can claim the same degree of reality; for none of the entities to be found either in Dream or Waking can get out of the clutches of time or space restricted to that particular sphere. Nor can any one of the things in either state pass on to the other maintaining its self-identity like Atman. Besides, neither of the states can co-exist with the other or

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continue to keep company with Atman, whereas our Atman can with equal ease manage to be alongside of either as long as it lasts. So far, then, we see that Atman as the witnessing consciousness of the two states, enjoys absolute independence. But can He cut off all connection with these states? Can He continue to exist by His own right regardless of either manifestation or the complete effacement of both? The one answer to this question is Deep Sleep, the state which defies all analysis from the manobasic view, but yields its secrets without reserve to the all-comprising method of enquiry we have been describing.

Like Waking and Dream, Sleep also presents a Mayic aspect to the manobasic view warped by its partiality for Waking. From that thought-position we regard Sleep as a passing cloud of ignorance in which we are daily enveloped, and as a temporary

inactivity into which we are daily thrust, by nature. But so soon as we try to assume the philosophic position of the witness of the three states, this much-neglected state comes to have entirely another meaning for us, which we can ill afford to ignore. It is then seen to be an intuition of our true nature divested of its apparent individuality and its personality, and an experience unburdened with the complex psychic machinery of the ego, the mind and the senses. Nothing like the Waking or Dream world nor the network of time and space in which it is enmeshed, is to be met with here. We are, indeed, lifted up to our own Self which is unalloyed bliss unconditioned by the fatigue of action and enjoyment. None of the limitations of either Waking or Dream have entrance here; saint and sinner, rich and poor man and woman, child and adult, all shed their respective limiting adjuncts before they

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enter the portals of this, their own Kingdom of Heaven.

Without tarrying to consider the most glowing terms in which the ineffable glory of this peculiar state is described by the Upanishads (such as *Brihadaranyaka* IV iii 21 to 32, and *Chandogya* VIII- 3 to 6) I shall just invite the attention of the reader to the twofold aspect of this peculiar expression of Reality, for we may contemplate on it in its relation to Dream and Waking, or reflect upon its intrinsic worth as a distinct experience in itself. In its relative phase, we have to admit that Sleep, whose sole content is Pure Consciousness untainted by a second, is essentially the cause of Dream or Waking; that, in other words, Pure Consciousness intuited as unlimited in sleep, somehow manifests itself in the other two states as subject and object, and appears as the ego endowed with a body, senses, and the mind on the

one hand, and as a world governed by the laws of time, space and causation on the other. This Pure Consciousness has to be supposed as invested with an inscrutable power in virtue of which it brings into existence this magnificent universe, and after sustaining it for a while, dissolves it into Itself without a residuum. As the *Mandukya* says:—

“एष सर्वेश्वर एष सर्वज्ञ एषोऽन्तर्याम्येष योनिः सर्वस्य प्रभवाप्ययौ हि भूतानाम्” ॥६॥

“This is the Lord of all. He is Omniscient, He is the Internal Controller, He is the one source of all, the origin and dissolution of all beings.”

At the same time, however, we cannot forget that the three states so called are really no states of consciousness. In the first place, the witnessing principle in us which is no other than Pure Consciousness,

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remains intact quite unaffected by the appearance or disappearance of these states ; and, in the second place, the three states admit neither of juxtaposition in space nor of succession in time. Strictly speaking, therefore, we ought to conclude that Sleep is only Pure Consciousness, which as having no relation whatever with its manifestation in the shape of ego and non-ego, is neither waking, nor dreaming nor sleeping at any time. It is therefore neither cause nor effect from this absolute stand-point. It is this phase of sleep as identical with the ever-changeless Atman that is described as "the Fourth" चतुर्थं मन्यन्ते स आत्मा relatively to the empirical egos of the three states and serves as the theme of अजातिवाद (non-genesis) found in Gaudapada's famous explanation of that Upanishad.

We may now briefly recapitulate the salient points of the Vedantic method of Avasthas which we have touched upon in the

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course of this short essay. The method assumes nothing, entails no belief in authority and seeks the aid of no special intuition. It builds upon the fundamentals of human experience and insists that all the three Avasthas, the Waking, Dream and Sleep, should be investigated before we can light upon the Absolute Reality underlying the manifestations of life. It sympathetically points out the basic error involved in speculations which confine the application of reason to the facts of Waking State, and while admitting the practical utility of such speculations so far as they go, it shows their utter futility and helplessness in constructing a Science of Reality. By a procedure peculiarly its own, it teaches us to look upon each of the three states as a complete expression of Reality, and then equating each of them to the other two, arrives at the remarkable result that our Atman as the Witnessing Consciousness

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of all the three states, is really the Highest Reality free from the taint of all the three illusory Avasthas which are superimposed upon it by the empirical understanding ; is, in brief, essentially nothing short of Pure Being, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss. The following benedictory verse with which Sankara begins his masterly commentary on the Mandukya contains in four lines the sum and substance of Vedantic teaching based on this unique method of Avasthas:

प्रज्ञानांशुप्रतानैः स्थिरचरनिकरव्यापिमिवर्याप्य लोकान्
भुक्त्वा भोगान् स्थविष्ठान्पुनरपि धिषणोद्भासितान् कामजन्यान् ।
पीत्वा सर्वान्विशेषान्स्वपिति मधुरभुङ्मायया भोजयन्नो
मायासंख्यातुरीयं परममृतमजं ब्रह्म यत्तत्ततोऽस्मिं ॥

“That which pervades the worlds through its rays of Consciousness spread out and diffused in animate and inanimate beings, and thus experiences the gross pleasures and pains in waking, and once

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more in dreams the subtle ones fancied by mind and born of desire; that which absorbs within Itself all distinctions and sleeps enjoying bliss, thus causing us through its Maya to taste all these states – to That which is “ the Fourth ” relatively to this illusory number three, but is absolutely the Highest, Immortal, Unborn Brahman, I make obeisance.



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